

Naperville residents are waiting 7 years for a Metra parking permit as officials brainstorm fix

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New commuters living in Naperville have to wait at least seven years to obtain a quarterly commuter parking permit at the Naperville Metra station if they put their name on the wait list now.

The situation is not new to Naperville or other western suburban towns along Metra's Burlington Northern Santa Fe line. Last month, the Naperville City Council directed city staff to look at how many spaces could be added to the city's current stock as part of the Fifth Avenue redevelopment plan and what adding those spaces would entail.

Naperville is served by the two busiest stations — Route 59 and Naperville — in the entire Metra system, and wait lists for the Naperville station located on Fourth Avenue date back to at least the 1980s, according to city officials. Express trains from each of the stations to Chicago's Loop make them ideal commuting hubs.

A low turnover rate and preference for the Naperville station over Route 59 contribute to the years-long wait list for the station just north of downtown. There is no waitlist for permits on the Naperville side of Route 59.

The Route 59 station is also in a fare zone that costs \$0.50 more for a one-way ride, about \$5 more for a 10-ride pass and \$14.50 more for a monthly pass than the Naperville station.

"Even though Route 59 is vastly improved now, driving down Route 59 is still an impediment for some people," said Jennifer Loudon, deputy director of Naperville's Transportation, Engineering and Development department.

"We've mapped out where the permit holders are, and many of them are coming from southwest. Choosing to go to the downtown Naperville station versus going to Route 59, there's just some patterns we're still trying to figure out how to explain."

More than 4,100 riders use the Naperville station daily, 5,800 commuters use the Route 59 station, and the BNSF is the busiest of all of Metra's 11 lines.

Of the 1,681 spaces at the Naperville station, 918 are dedicated to quarterly permit holders but those spaces generally don't fill up. Because about 10 percent to 20 percent of permit spaces are left empty on average, Naperville oversells the number of permits for each of the three dedicated lots.

“Our spaces that are dedicated for quarterly permit holders, the utilization there is significantly lower than what we see for our daily fee spaces. Our daily fee spaces are generally fully occupied by about 6:30 (a.m.),” Louden said.

“We are issuing more permits for our permit spaces than there actually are spaces, and we’re very aggressive about that because we’re trying to achieve high utilization of those spaces. We don’t want to see them sitting empty even though we often do.”

Naperville issues 850 quarterly permits for the 526 spots in the Burlington lot, which sees an average utilization rate of 89 percent, according to a presentation from city staff. The city issues 185 permits for the Parkview lot’s 110 spaces and sees an 88 percent utilization rate. And 474 permits are issued for the 282 quarterly spaces in the Kroehler lot, which sees a 90 percent utilization rate.

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“Despite the aggressive oversell, generally on the busiest days, which are in the middle of the week, we’re seeing typically only 80 to 90 percent occupancy of those permit spaces,” Louden said.

And the wait list at the Naperville Metra station continues to grow as people keep a tight grip on their permits.

“At the Naperville station we don’t see a lot of cancellations of people’s permits,” Louden said. “The issuance rates are very low because people hang on to their permits for a very long time. That’s why we’ve seen the length of time on the waitlist grown. I mean it grows every month that somebody’s waiting, basically.”

City officials are aware there is a second-hand market for the commuter parking permits. Most of the passing-down of parking permits is done under the guise of ride-shares, which are allowed, Louden said.

“So the idea behind that is if you have a permit, but your neighbor’s on the wait list, they should car pool with you,” Louden said. But if the main permit holder is, for example, traveling for a week, they should be able to let the neighbor use the permit they rely on for the carpool.

“What that really comes out to is people second-hand selling their permits,” Louden said. “We do revoke those permits when we are made aware of them. Generally that’s through some questionable account change forms. So we do question those, we will revoke permits when that happens.”

But that usually happens only one or two times a year, Louden said.

How to trim the list

One way to cut down waitlists is to increase permit prices, said Lindsay Bayley, a senior planner for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

Quarterly permits cost \$120 for residents and non-residents in the Parkview and Burlington lots, and \$110 for residents and \$135 for non-residents in the Kroehler lot.

“For a lot of communities, what we would recommend at CMAP is to better manage the parking supply by using pricing as you would with any other economic good,” Bayley said. “It’s about incentives as well as disincentives, and really the disincentive is going to be the cost and the wait list.”

P.S. Sriraj, director of the Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago, agrees that increasing the price can help discourage people from driving to and parking at the train station.

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“That’s never a very popular measure. But people are still willing to pay,” Sriraj said. “The city has to find where is the tipping point at which you will actually influence behavior.”

That can be done by asking commuters how much they’re willing to pay for a spot.

When it comes to increasing the number of parking spaces, Sriraj compared the move to adding an additional lane to alleviate vehicle traffic — something that’s shown to not work.

“Just by extension, if you’re going to add more spaces, that is not necessarily going to make life any better,” Sriraj said. “It would draw more attention to the increased capacity and spawn another group of people to apply for the parking spaces.”

That doesn’t mean the city shouldn’t add more spaces, Sriraj said, but it’s a fine line.

Cities should also be constantly looking at other transportation options for commuters, including Pace bus routes and whether those routes are serving all pockets of demand, Sriraj said.

The most popular way commuters get to the train station is by driving alone, followed by getting dropped up and taking a Pace bus.

Council members weigh in

Naperville City Council members Tuesday discussed commuter parking and how any improvements could be worked into the Fifth Avenue redevelopment project.

As a new commuter himself, Councilman Kevin Coyne said it is clear many people who have permits are not using them every day.

"If there is this big spread, are we not considering possibly selling more, or maybe even looking at how we're doing the program as a whole," Coyne asked. "That's a real shame when so many people have issues getting to work to have so many of those spots open every morning."

Some council members questioned whether adding more spaces would fix the issue.

"If we added say a couple hundred more, would it really have an effect, or would it just add more people to that list," Councilwoman Judy Brodhead said.

And with Metra trains already packed to capacity during rush hour, Councilman Benny White questioned where any additional commuters would go.

"We can add parking spaces, but we also have a train that only has so many cars," White said. "So we could put a million spaces up there, at some point you only can get so many people on the train."

As the city continues surveying people who are currently on the wait list, it will also need to take into account a future that could include driverless cars that would negate the need for parking garages when making a recommendation to city council.

"Employment and commuting patterns have changed and they're going to continue to do so in the future, so we want to make sure that we're considering the best option for managing those spaces," Loudon said.

"We know right now today that daily fee spaces provide the most flexibility in our system and they result in maximum amount of usage, but we also know there's a high value in the security that comes with having a quarterly permit for those commuters."

Waitlists in other towns on the BNSF

Naperville is far from the only town on the BNSF line to have a wait list for commuter parking permits.

In Lisle, the wait list for permit parking is two years for residents and four years for non-residents. The village has a total 770 permits and generally increases the permit price by \$5 annually, said Kim Reilly, a business office assistant for Lisle.

The Downers Grove wait lists range from about three years to just over seven years long, depending on the lot. The waitlist for commuter parking permits in Hinsdale is a year-and-a-half to two years long, but is only open to Hinsdale residents.

According to the city of Aurora's website, the waitlist for a permit parking spot at the downtown station is five to six years long, and the wait list for its Route 59 station is one to two years long.

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